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Coronavirus, community and solidarity

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Introduction

This short piece seeks to offer a sober yet optimistic speculation on the renewal of community and civic solidarity in the face of the rapidly unfolding coronavirus pandemic. Over the last forty years, social and civic solidarity have been systematically undermined by the neoliberal project. Yet over a decade ago, a global crisis of neoliberal finance capitalism presented us with an unprecedented opportunity to break away from its orthodoxies and rebuild the solidarity necessary for democratic citizenship. Instead, we lived through an astonishing period during which the ‘alchemy of austerity’ reworked the crisis as one of a bloated and inefficient welfare state (Clarke and Newman, 2012). ‘Zombie’ neoliberalism staggered on and inequality grew, as communities across the UK organised to resist austerity and ameliorate the worst effects of brutal cuts and punitive welfare reform. Perversely, a solidaristic rhetoric of ‘sharing the pain’ was invoked to justify the very policies that undermined solidarity: the reduction or closure of essential public services, youth and community centres, public libraries, as well as welfare reforms that the UN Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights compared to Victorian Poor Laws (Alston, 2018).

The pandemic has raised the stakes for those at the sharp end of all of this. Every day it becomes increasingly obvious how our experiences of daily life under ‘lockdown’ are fashioned by the intersecting dynamics of social class, ‘race’ and gender. Domestic violence has increased as women are trapped in homes with abusive partners (Townsend, 2020). Social distancing isn’t possible for those providing frontline services and those required to travel daily on crowded public transport in urban centres. As our world shrinks, the harsh reality of uneven development is starkly highlighted as issues of work, housing, public space (especially access to safe greenspace), transport, food security and broadband internet are felt most keenly by poorer communities. Despite this depressing portrait, there are also instances of, and opportunities for,

solidarity. In this period of social distancing how might we build on these opportunities to reduce social distance?

The rediscovery of social solidarity

In discussing solidarity, we ought to clarify its different meanings and inflections. Firstly, it is important to remember that solidarity isn't exclusively a leftist concept tied to expansive articulations of social justice. Solidarity can be understood in exclusive terms, including nativist, conservative and xenophobic varieties (Scholz, 2015). Secondly, we can differentiate between social solidarity and civic solidarity (Scholz, 2015). Social solidarity is a descriptive concept, whilst civic solidarity is a normative concept. Roughly understood, social solidarity refers to the objective cohesion and relations of interdependence underpinning a community or society. It is in this 'social' sense that we currently seem to be re-discovering solidarity, because in our shared vulnerability we are confronted with the reality of our mutual interdependence. We are all now expressing collective gratitude for our NHS. But more than this, we are suddenly alive to the reality that without our refuse workers, our Amazon employees, our gig economy delivery drivers, our supermarket workers, our teachers, our early-years workers, our care workers, our bus drivers, our cleaners, not to mention our NHS staff, life grinds to a spectacular halt. At the same time, we (men, in particular) are forced to confront the poorly paid or unpaid social reproductive labour undergirding the capitalist economy. For some of us, this rediscovery results in a type of ennui as the social hierarchy of labour flips on its head and we're left contemplating the social value of our own labour. Many people who ordinarily enjoy a higher degree of financial and job security are unceremoniously plunged into precarity as we are, once again, confronted with the shortcomings of the free market as a guarantor of human wellbeing. As a consequence, it is now much more difficult to 'other' those who depend on the welfare state. It turns out, we all do. This is the rediscovery of social solidarity.

The renewal of civic solidarity

This rediscovery of social solidarity in the face of the pandemic has motivated *acts* of solidarity at every level—from the familial, to the local community, through to the national. Streets and local communities organise themselves into WhatsApp groups providing networks of support for each other and the more vulnerable; people volunteer

with the NHS quite literally risking their lives to do so; people engage in quotidian but no less important acts of solidarity such as cutting the grass of elderly neighbours, buying groceries, emptying bins in local parks, and so on. Most visibly, we now stand on our doorsteps and clap every week for the NHS in a nation-wide collective display of symbolic solidarity. Yet symbolic solidarity is just that, symbolic. Moreover, it is vitally important that we don't succumb to voluntarist understandings of agency, expecting equity of action from those individuals, families and communities least equipped to act. My hope is that this acute crisis starkly highlights the more chronic crisis of care—of social reproductive labour—created by an economic system that treats it as a 'free gift' and therefore undermines the preconditions for its own reproduction (Arruza, Bhattacharya and Fraser, 2019).

Tackling this demands that our rediscovery of social solidarity acts as a waystation to the renewal of civic solidarity. We can understand civic solidarity as the institutionalisation of our mutual obligations as citizens through the state. Civic solidarity is associated with the European tradition of social democracy, whereby social rights are guaranteed through a universal welfare state (Scholz, 2015; Stjernø 2005). To understand exactly what's at stake here it's useful to turn briefly to philosopher Michael Sandel's arguments about social justice and civic virtue. Sandel recognizes that purely utilitarian justifications for democratic welfare states are lacking insofar as they fail to recognise how inequality systematically undermines the sense of community upon which democratic citizenship depends:

Public institutions such as schools, parks, playgrounds, and community centres cease to be places where citizens from different walks of life encounter one another. Institutions that once gathered people together and served as informal schools of civic virtue become few and far between. (Sandel, 2009, p. 267)

Real community requires civic solidarity and it feels as though this moment offers an opportunity to renew not only the latter, but with it, a sense of purpose in our work with communities. It seems obvious to draw parallels between the current context and the post-WWII context where a shared experience of hardship reduced social distance and generated the conditions for civic solidarity. However, nothing can simply be 'read off' from the existing conjuncture—it needs to be articulated into a coherent discourse adequate to the task of challenging the desire to return to 'business as usual.'

Conclusion: ‘Never let a good crisis go to waste’

Over a decade beyond the crisis of 2008, we stand at another ideological crossroad. On the one hand, we have the opportunity to build momentum for a different politics, one which identifies and protects ‘non-market norms’ and institutionalises a renewed sense of civic solidarity; one which recognises and acts to address the crisis of care we currently face. On the other hand, we are tempted to return to ‘business as usual’. From the beginning of this pandemic, we have been confronted with the double peril of the virus and its impact on an economic model which values growth at any cost. We are already navigating the media panic over recession, a one third drop in GDP, and so on.

But we know that GDP is a poor indicator for human wellbeing and the health of the body politic. We know that quality jobs didn’t follow economic recovery after 2008. We know that economic growth doesn’t ‘trickle down’ but rather ‘up’, that risk is socialised whilst profit is privatised. We know that compensation for falling wages and job insecurity through credit-fuelled consumerism (ensured by the exploitation of labour and expropriation of resources overseas) is not only a poor substitute for what matters in life, but ecologically untenable. The very real danger lies in returning to ‘normal’ because the implications are terrifyingly plain to see: a return to a second round of ultra-austerity where we are urged to believe once again that we are ‘all in it together’, tasked with a collective duty to steady the ship following an unprecedented period of state spending to tackle the pandemic. In this neoliberal discourse, symbolic solidarity is allowed, even encouraged, whilst calls for civic solidarity are branded as disruptive or unpatriotic. Good neoliberals ‘never let a good crisis go to waste’ and this is how we should also see the task ahead of us—as an opportunity to weave together longstanding struggles *against* the privatisation of public space, the crisis of reproductive labour, and thus *for* an expanded conception of labour rights and a humane and inclusive welfare state.

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